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ABSTRACT

In May 1993, 1,060 people in England and Wales were surveyed on the use of basic skills in everyday life. Data obtained from these questionnaires were weighted to reflect the demographic profile of the population in terms of age, gender, working status, and social class. Interviewees were asked 40 questions about activities they had done in the 7 days before the interview. Answers were divided into four groups: activities undertaken by more than 75 percent of the sample, those undertaken by more than 50 but less than 75 percent, those undertaken by more than 25 but less than 50 percent, and those undertaken by less than 25 percent. On average, slightly more people had undertaken tasks using basic math (48 percent) than reading (41 percent) or writing (33 percent). More men had undertaken activities involving reading than women (43 to 39 percent). Slightly more women had undertaken activities involving writing and numeracy. Fewer people over 65 years old had undertaken many tasks. Fewer than average people in the 16-24 age group undertook some activities. More people in the youngest (age 16-24 years) and in the oldest (over 65 years) age groups said they sometimes had difficulties with reading and writing. Eighty-two percent of all interviewees said they did not have disabilities that make reading, writing, and numeracy activities difficult. Only 49 percent of people who said their basic skills were poor said they had no disabilities. (YLB)

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BASIC SKILLS in everyday life

ABSU *The Basic Skills Unit*
Registered Charity No. 227426

Background

BASIC SKILLS are the key underpinning skills for everyday life and for work in the modern world. By basic skills, we mean:

“the ability to read, write, and speak in English and use mathematics at a level necessary to function at work and in society in general.”

WE know a good deal about the basic skills people need for jobs. A survey of 1.3 million middle and lower level jobs carried out for ALBSU by the Institute for Manpower Studies (IMS) in 1992 suggested that most jobs require some competence in basic skills. Almost every job requires reading and oral communication skills and many jobs need fairly high levels of competence with these skills. The majority of jobs also require some numeracy skills.

There is, of course, considerable variation in the level of basic skills required in different jobs. Reading, writing and oral communication are particularly important for clerical and secretarial jobs. Numeracy is important in sales jobs.

We also know that somebody with very poor basic skills is likely to find 49 in 50 jobs closed to them. Even a person with some, albeit fairly limited competence, will find that they are not likely to get between a quarter and a half of these middle and lower level jobs. Of course, many people in jobs have limited basic skills but manage reasonably well because of their experience and knowledge of the job. They also become adept at developing techniques to disguise their lack of competence.

While we know much about basic skills and the world of work, we know little about the basic skills people use in everyday life. So, although it's often suggested that the target for education is that everyone should leave school literate and numerate, it's rare to find an explanation of what being literate and numerate means in the 1990s. Certainly it doesn't mean just being able to read and write your name as in Victorian Britain; nor does it mean being able to understand everything written or to spell perfectly or to be able to use calculus.



The Survey

WE asked Gallup to conduct a survey among the general public in England and Wales on the use of basic skills in everyday life. 1,060 people were interviewed in May 1993 using a carefully structured questionnaire. Although only just over a thousand people were questioned, Gallup made sure that they were a representative sample of the population aged 16 or over. The final data obtained from these interviews was weighted to ensure that it reflected the demographic profile of the English and Welsh population in respect of age, gender, working status and social class.

Everyone in the sample was asked 40 questions about activities they had done in the 7 days before the interview. They were asked to exclude activities involving basic skills that they did for work or as part of full-time study.

Some activities involving basic skills, such as filling in a tax form or booking a holiday, are more likely to take place at certain times of the year. However, asking people to cast their mind back more than 7 days was thought to be asking a lot of peoples' memories.

We have divided the answers given to the questions into four groups.



GROUP A is used to describe activities which more than three quarters of people in the sample had undertaken in the 7 days before the interview.

GROUP C is used to describe activities which more than a quarter, but less than half of people in the sample had undertaken.

GROUP B is used to describe activities which more than a half, but less than three quarters of people had undertaken.

GROUP D is used to describe activities which less than 25% of people in the sample had undertaken in the last 7 days before the interview.

Group A



THERE were four activities involving basic skills which more than 3 in 4 of those interviewed had undertaken in the last seven days (the figure in brackets indicates the percentage of people in the group who said that they had done this in the previous seven days).

• Made a cash payment handing over the exact money.	(86%)
• Checked change given.	(85%)
• Used a dictionary, encyclopaedia or telephone directory.	(78%)
• Filled out a form such as a paying-in slip, or withdrawal slip in a building society, bank or written out a cheque.	(75%)

Group B

—HERE were ten activities involving basic skills which more than half of those interviewed had undertaken in the last seven days.

- Set a timing device, eg. cooker, central heating system, video, anti-intruder light switches, alarm clock, etc.

(71%)

- Read a short advertisement.

(69%)

- Looked up or extracted information from a book or articles from newspapers, magazines.

(67%)

- Read signs such as safety signs, detailed warnings, food packaging and preparation.

(67%)

- Compared prices of quantity and quality of goods to find the best buy.

(65%)

- Planned how to spend money for a holiday, weekly spending, arranging household spending, etc.

(61%)

- Compared prices for different brands of a product sold in the same size units.

(60%)

- Written out a shopping list or other type of list.

(60%)

- Read through a short recipe or similar set of instructions.

(54%)

- Read a short note or letter.

(52%)



Group C

THERE were twelve activities involving basic skills which more than 1 in 4 of those interviewed had undertaken in the seven days before the interview.

• Written a short note to someone.	(49%)
• Made payments for four or more items or services by cheque, credit card, postal order or voucher.	(44%)
• Measured out or weighed ingredients accurately.	(43%)
• Planned a journey using maps.	(39%)
• Used brochures or a manual.	(38%)
• Calculated the discount on a product with a percentage off the marked price.	(37%)
• Referred to detailed operating manuals.	(36%)
• Used a simple bus or train timetable.	(31%)
• Filled out a form to order something by mail order, bought a season ticket, booked a holiday or filled in some other short form.	(28%)
• Made a filing system or reference system.	(28%)
• Compared interest rates for different services.	(27%)
• Made a detailed calculation on volume or weights and measures.	(25%)



Group D

THERE were fourteen activities involving basic skills which less than 1 in 4 of those interviewed had undertaken in the previous seven days.

• Written a short letter to an official organisation or company.	(24%)
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• Measured the rooms in your home, windows, etc. in preparation for DIY activities such as decorating, repair, refurbishment or other pastime.	(23%)
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• Filled out some type of claim form, accident form, job application form or other detailed form.	(22%)
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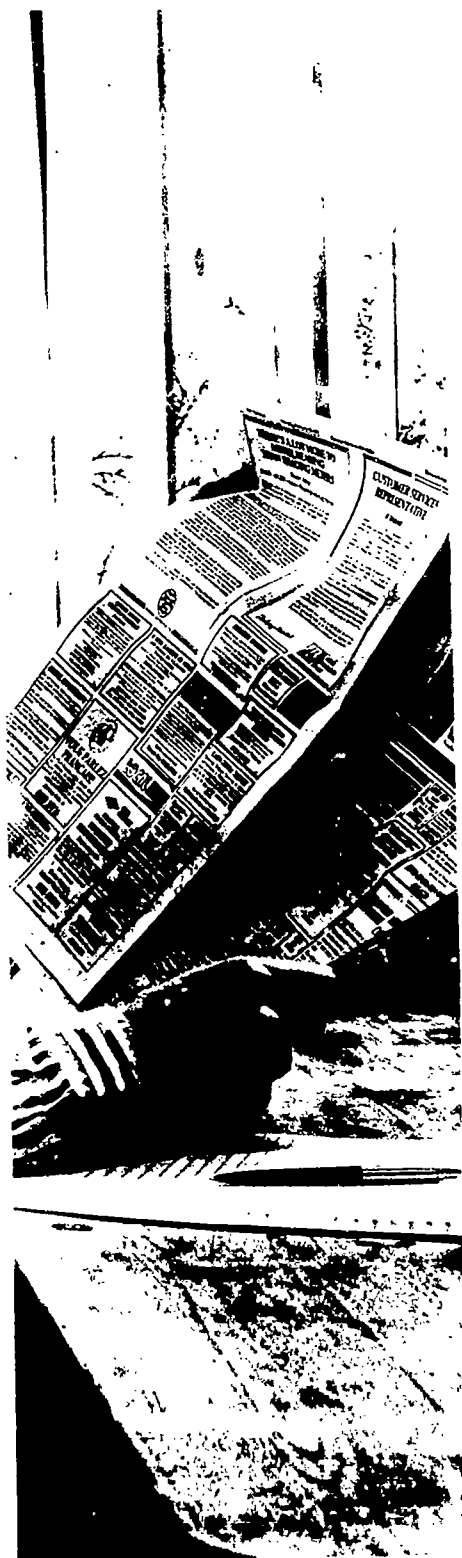
• Used a plan or map of a building.	(21%)
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• Kept an extended diary or journal of daily events.	(21%)
• Written a long letter or article describing events or an experience or similar writing.	(21%)
• Made detailed measurements in preparation for DIY work.	(20%)
• Researched a topic such as a political issue to find out about an area or other topic connected to your daily life.	(20%)
• Selected information from complex tables and charts.	(19%)
• Extracted information from a computer database.	(18%)
• Used a library reference system.	(18%)
• Written out a set of instructions for someone else, compiled a leaflet or short social club report or similar writing.	(18%)
• Used a conversion table such as metric to Imperial, Centigrade to Fahrenheit or vice versa.	(16%)
• Filled in an income tax form or compiled a CV.	(15%)



Reading, Writing and Maths



On average slightly more people in the group had undertaken tasks using basic maths (48%) than reading (41%) or writing (33%). The task using **maths** undertaken most often was:

- | | |
|---|-------|
| • Making a cash payment handing over the exact money. | (86%) |
|---|-------|

The least often was:

- | | |
|---|-------|
| • Selecting information from complex tables and charts. | (19%) |
|---|-------|

The task using reading undertaken most often was:

- | | |
|---|-------|
| • Using a dictionary, encyclopaedia or telephone directory. | (78%) |
|---|-------|

The least often was:

- | | |
|--|-------|
| • Using a conversion table such as metric to imperial, Centigrade to Fahrenheit or vice versa. | (16%) |
|--|-------|

The writing task undertaken most often was:

- | | |
|--|-------|
| • Filling out a form such as a paying-in slip, or withdrawal slip in a building society, bank or written out a cheque. | (75%) |
|--|-------|

The least often was:

- | | |
|--|-------|
| • Filling in an income tax form or compiling a CV. | (15%) |
|--|-------|

Women and Men

THERE were some differences between women and men on some activities. In general, more men in the group interviewed had undertaken the activities involving reading in the last seven days than women (43% – 39%). Slightly more women in the group had undertaken activities involving writing and numeracy than the men in the group, although these differences are not statistically significant.

This general picture disguises considerable differences on some activities.

Reading

19% more women had read through a short recipe or similar set of instructions (63% – 44%). 11% more had read a short note or letter (57% – 46%) and 14% more had read signs such as safety signs, detailed warnings, food packaging and preparation (74% – 60%).

On the other hand 22% more men had referred to detailed operating manuals (48% – 19%). 15% more had looked up or extracted information from a book or articles from newspapers, magazines (75% – 60%) and 14% more had used a plan or map of a building (28% – 14%).

Writing

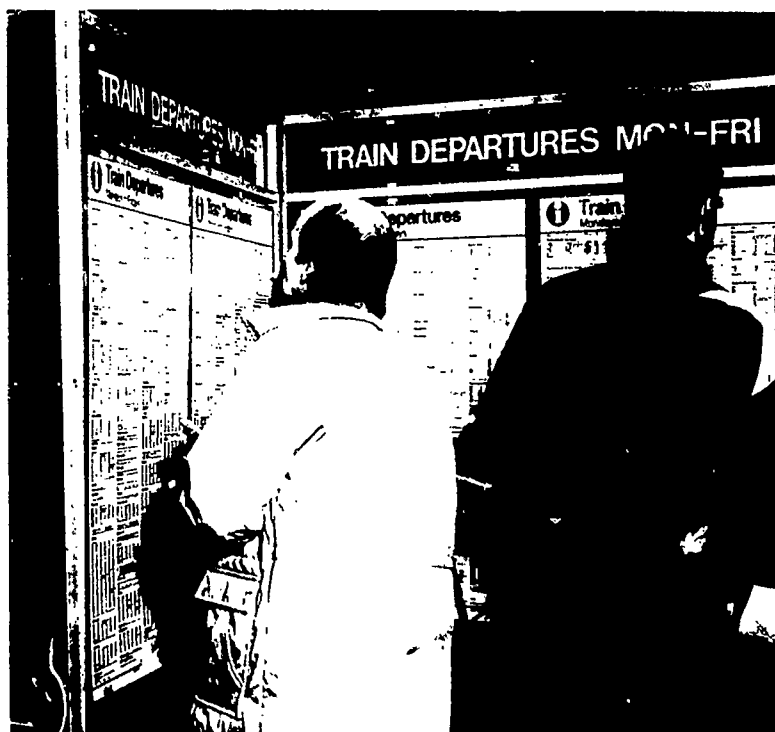
24% more women than men had written out a shopping list or other type of list (72% – 48%). 14% more had written a short note to someone (56% – 42%) and 6% more had written a long letter or article (24% – 18%).

12% more men than women in the group had filled out some type of claim form, accident form, job application or other detailed form (28% – 16%). 10% more had filled in an income tax form or compiled a CV (20% – 10%) and 7% more had 'written a set of instructions for someone else, compiled a leaflet or short social club report' (22% – 15%).

Numeracy

25% more women than men in the group had measured out or weighed ingredients accurately (55% – 30%). 11% more had compared prices for different brands of product (66% – 55%) and 5% more had planned how to spend money for a holiday, weekly spending etc (63% – 58%).

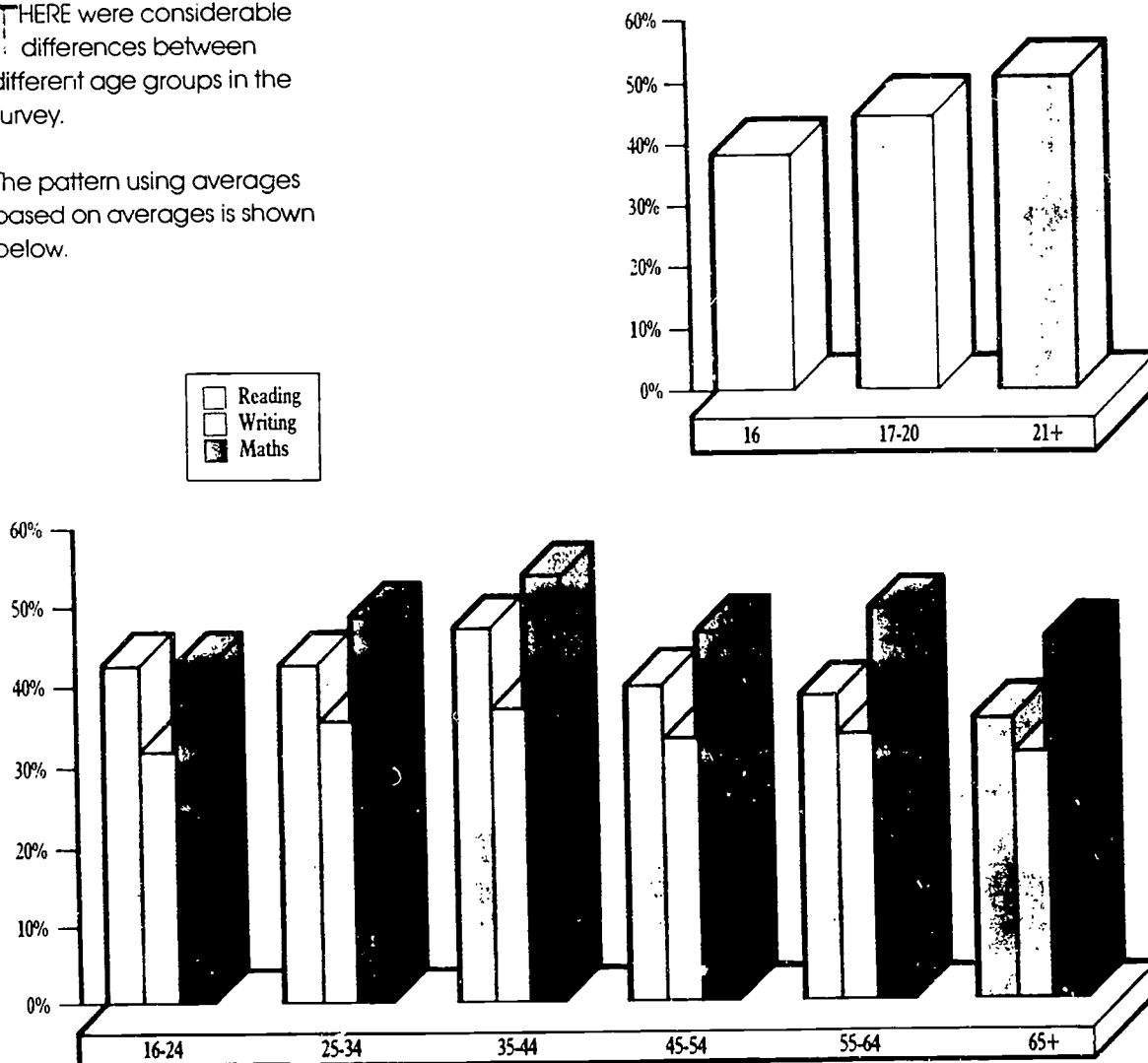
13% more of the men interviewed than of the women had selected information from complex tables and charts (26% – 13%). 12% more had compared interest rates for different services (33% – 21%) and 10% more had made detailed measurements in preparation for DIY work (25% – 15%).



Age

THERE were considerable differences between different age groups in the survey.

The pattern using averages based on averages is shown below.



The Over 65s

FEWER people over 65 years old in the group interviewed had undertaken many of the tasks in the last seven days. For example, while 76% of the 35-44 age group had read a short advertisement only 54% of the over 65s had.

While 32% of the 16-24 age group had extracted information from a computer database only 2% of the over 65s had.

However, more over 65s had used a library reference system, written out a shopping list or other type of list and kept a diary or journal.

The 16-24 Age Group

FEWER than average people in the youngest age group in the survey undertook some activities. The most significant of these was:

- used a dictionary, encyclopaedia or telephone directory (72% as against an average of 78%)

- planned a journey using maps (32% as against an average of 39%)

- used holiday brochures (33% as against an average of 38%)

- filled out a form such as a paying-in slip or withdrawal slip or written out a cheque (66% as against 75% on average)

- written out a shopping list or other type of list (42% as against 60%)

- written a short letter to an official organisation (19% as against 24%)

- filled in an income tax form or compiled a CV (12% as against 15%)

- made payments for four or more items or services by cheque, credit card, postal order or voucher (29% as against 44%)

- compared prices of quantity and quality of goods to find the best buy (53% as against 65%)

- compared interest rates for different services (16% as against 27%)

- compared prices for different brands of a product (51% as against 60%)

- calculated the discount on a product (27% as against 37%)

- measured out or weighed ingredients accurately (36% as against 45%)

- made detailed measurements in preparation for DIY work (12% as against 20%)



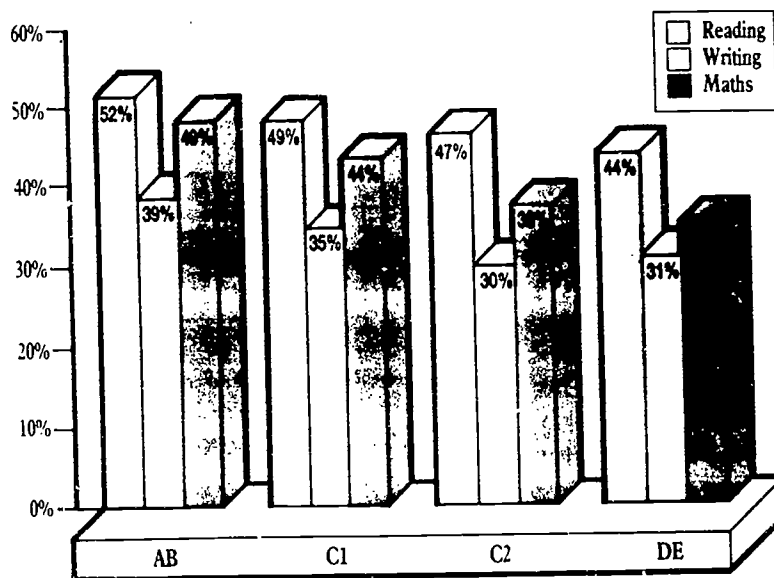
Social Class - Education

SOME of the differences between the youngest people in the group and other age groups were predictable. It is likely that fewer young people have a cheque book or regularly shop for food or are involved in DIY than older people.

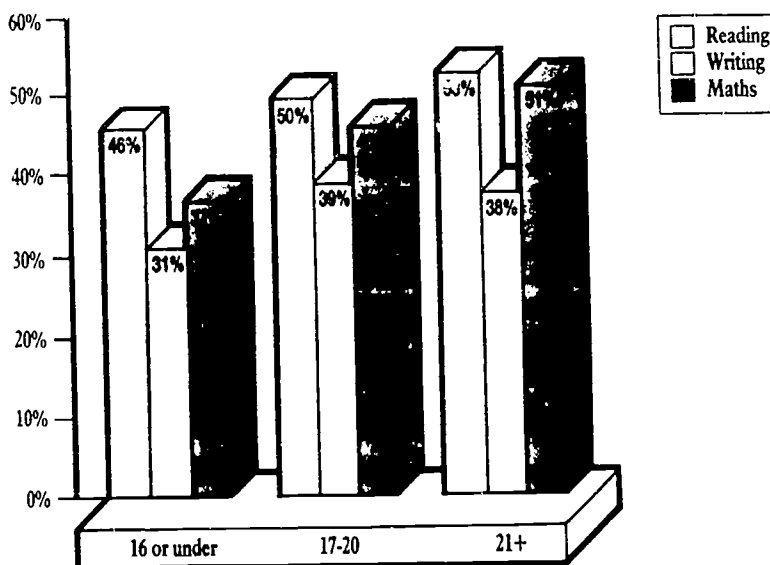
A higher number of 16-24 year olds in the survey than any other age group had:

- extracted information from a computer database (32% as against 18% on average)
- used a simple bus or train timetable (43% as against 31%)
- filled out a form to order something (32% as against 28% on average)
- written a long letter or article (26% as against 21%)

In general the number of people in the survey who had undertaken reading, writing and numeracy activities in the seven days before the interview was higher in social class AB than in social class DE.



PEOPLE in the survey were asked about the age they left full-time education. However, no other information is available about their education, except for self assessment of their own basic skills. The number of people in the survey who had undertaken reading, writing and numeracy activities in the seven days before the interview was lowest for those who left school at the earliest age. The pattern, based on averages was:



Performance

ALTHOUGH the group questioned were not asked to undertake any of the basic skills tasks involved in the questions, recent research published by ALBSU indicates how some people perform at different tasks.

The research, 'Basic Skills of Young Adults', is a study of a representative group of 1,650 people born in one week of 1970. As well as being asked about basic skills, this group undertook a number of reading and basic maths tasks at a range of levels. Three writing tasks were also undertaken, although these still have to be analysed. The tasks undertaken were derived from the ALBSU Communication and Numeracy Standards. These Standards describe four levels of competence in Communication Skills – Foundation, Levels 1, 2, and 3 – and three levels of competence in Numeracy – Foundation, Levels 1 and 2.

We have roughly 'mapped' the ALBSU Standards in Communication and Numeracy to the English and Mathematics National Curriculum and General National Vocational Qualifications (GNVQs). It is important to remember, however, that the 'map' is very much an approximation as the ALBSU Standards, the National Curriculum and GNVQs all work very differently.

The approximate equivalence is:

ALBSU Standards	National Curriculum	GNVQ
<i>Communication</i>	<i>English</i>	<i>Communication</i>
Foundation Level 1 Level 2 Level 3	Level 2-3 Level 4-5 Level 6 Level 8	Foundation Intermediate Advanced
<i>Numeracy</i>	<i>Mathematics</i>	<i>Numeracy Skills</i>
Foundation Level 1 Level 2	Level 3 Level 4-5 Level 6	Foundation Intermediate

It should be emphasised that the tasks undertaken by the BCS70 group may not mirror precisely the activities people were asked about by Gallup. However, the levels of competence required are broadly similar.



At Foundation Level in Reading:

- 5% of the BCS70 Group could not complete the Foundation Level task of reading a short advertisement. This was a task which almost 7 in 10 of those questioned by Gallup had done in the previous seven days.
- 7% of the BCS70 Group could not complete the Foundation Level task of using a plan or map of a building. This was a task that just over 1 in 5 of those questioned had done in the previous seven days.

At Level 1 in Reading:

- 5% of the BCS70 Group could not complete the Level 1 task of using a dictionary, encyclopaedia or telephone directory. This was a task which almost 4 in 5 of those questioned had done in the previous seven days.
- 9% of the BCS70 Group could not complete the Level 1 of looking up or

extracting information from a book or articles from newspapers or magazines. This was a task which almost 7 in 10 of those questioned had done in the previous seven days.

At Level 2 of the ALBSU Standards in Reading:

- 1 in 3 of the BCS70 Group could not complete the Level 2 task of using holiday brochures and manuals. This was a task which almost 4 in 10 of those questioned by Gallup had done in the previous seven days.

At Foundation Level in Numeracy:

- 15% of the BCS70 Group could not complete the Foundation Level task of checking the change given in a shop. This was a task

which almost 9 in 10 of those questioned had done in the previous seven days.

At Level 1 in Numeracy:

- 23% of the BCS70 Group could not complete the Level 1 task of making payments for four or more items or services by cheque, credit card, postal order or voucher. This was a task which more than 4 in 10 of those questioned had done in the previous seven days.

The BCS70 research indicated that:

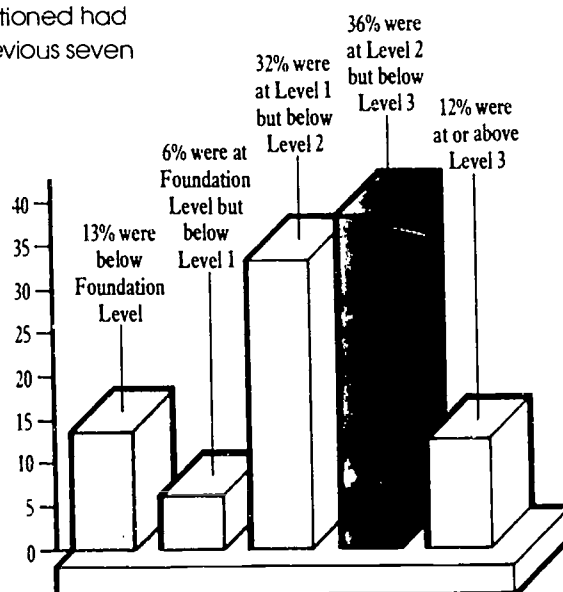
• 13% of the people tested were below Foundation Level

• 6% were at Foundation Level but below Level 1

• 32% were at Level 1 but below Level 2

• 36% were at Level 2 but below Level 3

• and only 12% were at or above Level 3.



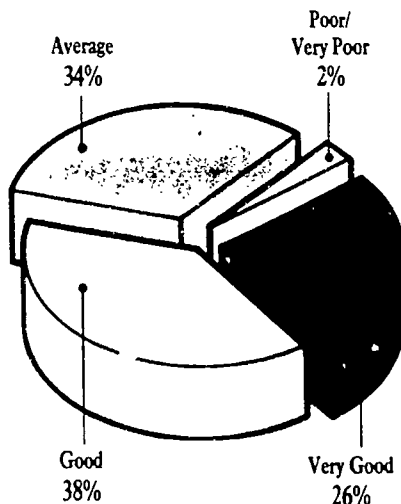
We believe that an NVQ Level 2 (one of the main National Education and Training Targets) demands communication skills at about Level 2 of the ALBSU Standards.

Self Assessment of Basic Skills

THE 1,060 people interviewed by Gallup were also asked some questions about their own assessment of their competence in reading, writing and numeracy. Self assessment has obvious weaknesses as a means of estimating the level and scale of the need for help with basic skills. One person's problem is another person's competence and while some people overestimate the skills they possess, others may underestimate them. Furthermore, the categories used by Gallup were very broad and general.

People interviewed were asked:

- Thinking about your own basic skills, would you rate them as very good, good, average, poor or very poor?



The people interviewed were also asked about how they dealt with situations where they needed basic skills in their daily lives. The precise question was:

- Thinking of situations in your daily life away from work or study where you might be required to read, write or make numerical calculations, would you say you can usually cope with all or most of them or do you sometimes or often have difficulties?

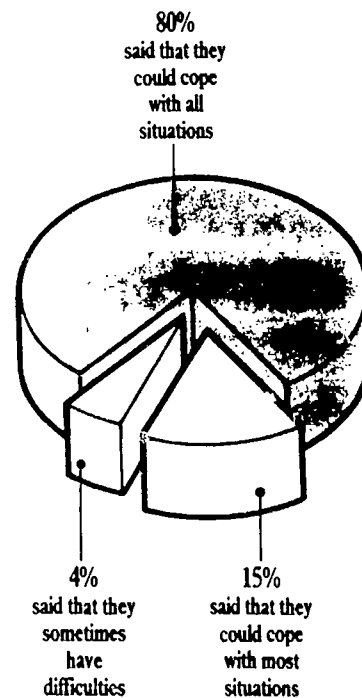
People were asked this question about reading, writing and numeracy separately. The answers given were:

Reading

- 80% said that they could cope with all situations
- 15% said that they could cope with most situations
- 4% said that they sometimes have difficulties.

More people in the youngest age group (age 16-24 years) and in the over 65s said that they sometimes have difficulties (8% and 7% respectively compared to 2% on average for the other age groups). Significantly lower numbers in the 16-24 age group said that they could cope with all reading situations they met in daily life (72% compared to 80% for the group as a whole).

There were few other unexpected differences in self assessment. More people who felt that their basic skills were poor said that they sometimes had difficulties, as did more in social classes C2 and DE and more who had left school at age 16 or under. There were no significant differences between women and men.



Writing

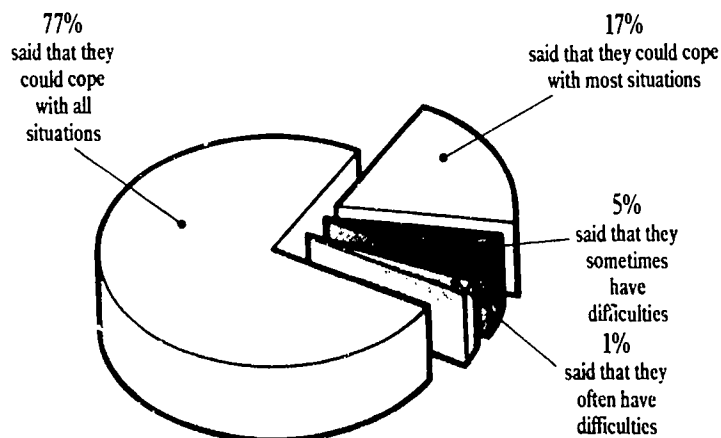
- 77% said that they could cope with all situations.

- 17% said that they could cope with most situations.

- 5% said that they sometimes have difficulties.

- 1% said that they often have difficulties.

Again more people in the youngest age group (age 16-24 years) and in the over 65s said that they sometimes have difficulties with writing (8% in both compared to between 3%-4% on average for the other age groups). On the other hand only 1% of the 35-44 age group said that they sometimes



had problems with writing. As with reading a significantly lower number in the 16-24 age group said that they could cope with all writing situations they met in daily life (70% compared to 77% for the group as a whole). Other differences followed the pattern for reading.

Numeracy

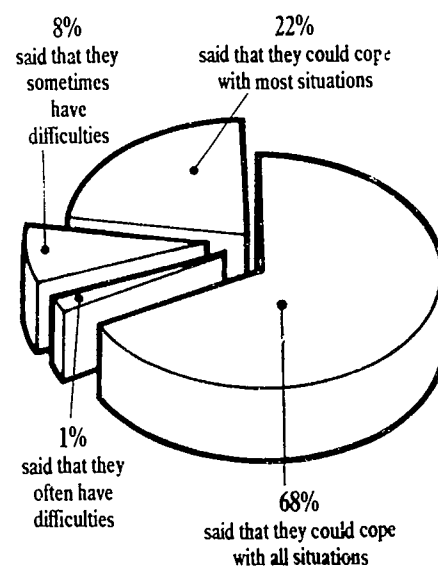
- 68% said that they could cope with all situations.

- 22% said that they could cope with most situations.

- 8% said that they sometimes have difficulties.

- 1% said that they often have difficulties.

There was no significant difference between people in the youngest age group (age 16-24 years) and other age groups in the survey in respect of numeracy. In fact, more people in the 25-34 age said that they sometimes have difficulties than in any other age group (12% as against an average of 8%).



Significantly more women than men professed some difficulties with numeracy. Only 62% of women interviewed said that they could cope with all situations involving numeracy (compared with 74% of men) and while 12% of women said that they sometimes have difficulties only 5% of men said that they did. Other differences (social class, terminal education age etc.) followed the pattern for reading and writing.

Of course some people can cope fairly well with basic skills in their daily lives because they avoid activities that involve reading, writing and/or numeracy. Some tasks can be avoided fairly easily, while other tasks can be passed on to someone else such as a partner or close relative. The literature on adult literacy and basic skills in the UK is littered with examples of people going to great lengths to disguise their lack of competence. So being able to cope with all of the everyday basic skills activities in daily life does not necessarily indicate a high level of competence; in some cases it indicates task avoidance and a low level of engagement with reading, writing and numeracy.

Gallup asked people in the group:

- **Do you ever avoid activities in your daily life which involve reading, writing or numerical calculations because you find some activities difficult or lack confidence in your skills?**



Reading

6% answered yes to this question. Whereas only 4% of the 55-64 age group answered yes, 10% of the 16-24 group said they avoided activities because of difficulties or lack of confidence. There was no statistically significant difference between women and men. The pattern for social class and terminal education age was as would be expected with social class DE and those who left school earliest having the most people who said they did avoid some reading activities. 44% of the people who were interviewed and who assessed their own basic skills as poor, said that they avoided activities that involved reading.

Writing

The percentage who answered yes to this question was 9%. 12% of the 16-24 group said that they avoided writing activities

compared to only 7% of the 35-44 age group. There was no difference between women and men and the pattern for social class and terminal education age was similar as that for reading. 69% of the people who were interviewed and who assessed their own basic skills as poor, said that they avoided activities that involved writing.

Numeracy

13% of those interviewed said that they avoided activities that involved making numerical calculations. There was no statistical difference between different age groups. However, while only 10% of men answered yes to this question, this increased to 16% among the women questioned. The social class and education pattern were similar to that for reading and writing. 55% of those who had said that their basic skills were poor answered yes to this question.

Other Problems

SOME people who have difficulties with basic skills have other problems, such as a disability or handicap. Some have a serious learning difficulty, although an earlier survey by ALBSU indicated that less than 1 in 10 of adults with basic skills problems has serious learning difficulties. It is likely that the nature of the group interviewed by Gallup excluded people who have such serious learning difficulties that they were not able to understand or answer the questions asked.

while only 1% of the 16-24 age group said that they had a problem holding a pen, 8% of the over 65s answered yes to this question. There were no significant statistical differences between women and men and the pattern for social class and terminal education age was similar to previous questions.

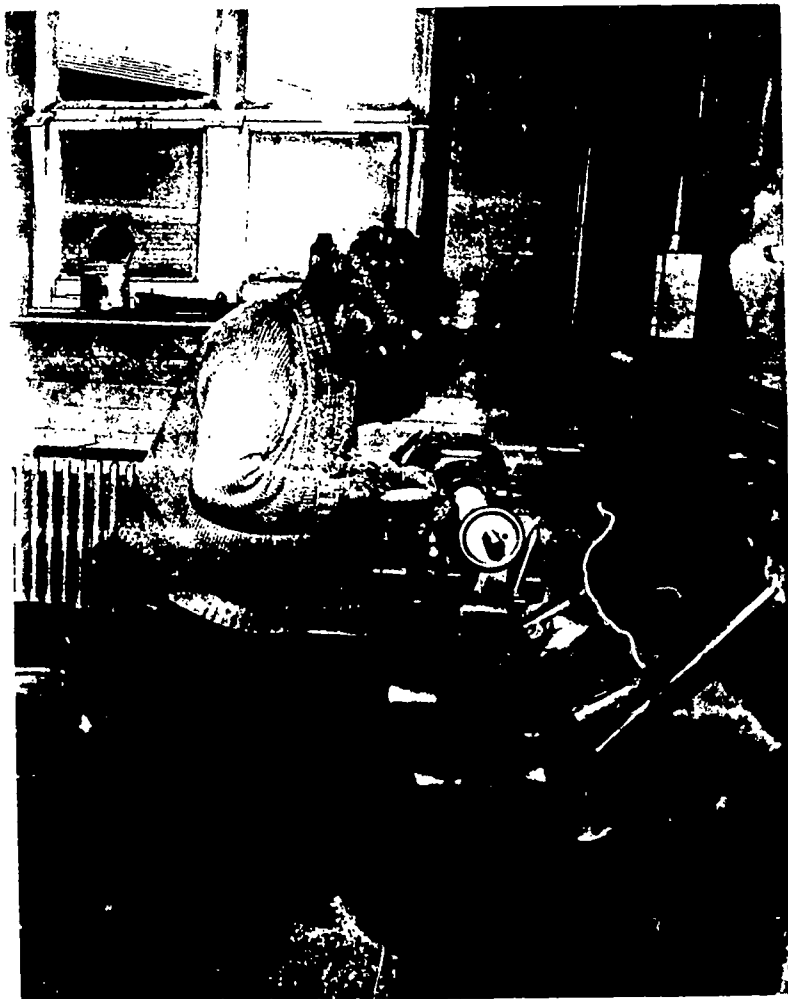
Only 49% of the people who said that their basic skills were poor said that they had no disabilities. 42% said that they

had eyesight problems, 29% said that they had problems holding a pen and 15% said that they had some other problem. It is difficult to draw any definitive conclusions from this though. The level of problem was not defined and eyesight problems are likely to range from partial sight to a simple need for glasses. Similarly, some people who have problems with basic skills identify physical problems as the cause rightly or wrongly.

Gallup asked the 1,060 people interviewed:

- Do you have any of the following disabilities which make reading, writing, using numbers or making numerical calculations difficult?

82% of those interviewed answered no to this question. However, 16% said that they had eyesight problems, 3% said that they had problems holding a pen because of arthritis or something similar and 2% said that they had some other problem. As might be expected the number of people answering yes to this question increased with age. So whereas only 9% of the 16-24 age group said that they had eyesight problems, 27% of the over 65s said that they had. Similarly



ALBSU - The Basic Skills Unit

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